

“The Snake Crusher: Part 4”

Text: Luke 2:1-14

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on December 23, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** It is not the most famous Christmas carol but it is one of the most loved. It was written by Henry Longfellow after tragedy struck his home in 1861. Henry’s wife, Fanny, had cut their daughter’s hair. She wanted to preserve a lock of hair by sealing it in some wax but as she melted the wax something happened and her dress caught fire.
 - Henry was sleeping in the next room and was awakened by her screams. He ran in to help her and tried to smother the flames by wrapping himself around her.
 - But sadly she had already suffered severe burns and died the next morning. Henry was so burned from his attempt to save her that he was unable to attend his own wife’s funeral.
- The first Christmas after Fanny’s death, Henry wrote these words in his journal: **“How inexpressibly sad are all holidays.”** A year after the incident, he wrote, **“I can make no record of these days. Better to leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace.”**
 - Longfellow then received word that his oldest son Charles, a lieutenant in the Army during the American Civil War, was shot but not killed.
- On Christmas day, 1863, Longfellow—a 57-year-old widowed father of six children—heard the bells ring out from the local church. He thought of the words of our scripture passage this morning where the angels say, “peace on earth.”
 - Yet, he could not reconcile the message of peace on earth with the death of his wife and the violence of the American Civil War. All the suffering, death, and evil in the world seemed to mock the idea of peace on earth.
 - And so he wrote a poem, which became the Christmas carol called *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*.
- We are going to look at the lyrics throughout the message but for now let’s just reflect on Longfellow’s struggle. If Christmas is about peace on earth then where is the peace? We are wrestling here with what we call “the problem of evil.”
 - If God is good and all-powerful, why does he allow evil and suffering? Why doesn’t he do something about it? This single question is a barrier that stops many people from becoming Christians.
 - But there is an even deeper question that not only stops people from coming to faith but also causes others to lose their faith. That question is, “Why do I suffer?” Why did *my* child die? Why did *I* lose my job? Why did *my* marriage fall apart? When people lose their faith it is not usually because of logical arguments. No, it is *life*, not *logic*, that often causes people to lose their faith.
- This morning I want to show you that the message of Christmas can answer many of your intellectual questions about this but, even better, it can provide you with the emotional strength you need to face suffering, evil, and death.
 - If you are in the midst of a difficult time, this message is for you. But this message is also intended to prepare us for when suffering comes. For, if you live long enough, it will surely come.
 - To that end, I want to show you three things about the message of Christmas. Alongside these three things, I also want to look at three stanzas from Henry Longfellow’s Christmas carol.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF CHRISTMAS

- The first thing we see in this passage is **(SHOW SLIDE 2) the announcement of Christmas.**
 - You can see this great announcement in verses 10 and 11. The angel says, **READ 10b-11** - **“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city**

of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” And then look at verse 14. A great heavenly host of angels say, **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”**

- So the joyous announcement of Christmas is that **(SHOW SLIDE 3) peace has come.**
- To really appreciate how wonderful this announcement is you have to understand what this word “peace” means. It is a good translation but our English word cannot fully capture what the Bible means when it talks about peace. We use the word “peace” to mean the absence of conflict. When a war ends we say, “there is peace.”
 - But in the Bible peace is far more than the end of a conflict. It also includes everything that makes life whole. It is getting rid of the negative but it is also the addition of everything that is positive.
 - To experience peace in the Bible means to experience safety, security, well-being, wholeness, and harmony. Peace is fullness of life.
- So, to bring all this together, the angel says the birth of Jesus is the best news anyone has ever heard. It should fill us with great joy. Verse 14 says that his birth results in praise to God in heaven and peace for those on earth.
 - Peace has come because, as the angel declares in verse 11, Jesus is “a Saviour.” He comes to rescue us from our sin. He comes to rid the world of evil and suffering. He comes to bring fullness of life.
 - In Jesus, peace has come.
- So as Longfellow sat down on Christmas Day he wrote the first stanza of his poem. It goes like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 4)**
 - **I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**
- But Longfellow’s suffering and our own suffering seem to stand in direct contradiction to this. This brings us to the second thing about Christmas.

THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTMAS

- In the second place, let’s talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 5) the problem of Christmas.** The problem of Christmas is obvious. If peace has come then **(SHOW SLIDE 6) where is the peace?**
 - Longfellow went on in the next couple of stanzas to talk about how terrible the American Civil War was. The country was torn apart. Brothers killed brothers. The thunder of the cannons seemed to drown out the idea of peace on earth. And so, he wrote this powerful stanza: **(SHOW SLIDE 7)**
 - **And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”**
- This is a huge problem. The continued existence of evil, death, and suffering seem to contradict the announcement of Christmas.
 - Oh God, where is this peace when couples struggle with infertility?
 - Where is this peace when 1 in 5 pregnancies end in miscarriages?
 - Where is this peace when the dark clouds of depression hang over the heads of so many even on the sunniest of days?
 - Oh God, where is this peace when grandparents ache for troubled lives of their children and grandchildren?
 - Where is this peace when people feel overwhelmed by loneliness?
 - Where, oh God, is this peace when our bodies fail us, when cancer devours, and when every single one of us will fall before the sword of death?

- The angels declare peace on earth and yet there is no peace.
 - This is the problem of Christmas.
- But things get worse because this forces us to ask **(SHOW SLIDE 8) two related questions. First, why would a God of peace create a world with evil and suffering?**
 - The English comedian and actor, Stephen Fry, is an atheist. In an interview he was asked what he would say if he died and found out that God really does exist. **(SHOW VIDEO)**
 - **Gay Byrne: Suppose what Oscar believed in as he died, in spite of your protestations, suppose it's all true. And you walk up to the pearly gates and you are confronted by God. What will Stephen Fry say to him, her, or it?**
 - **Stephen Fry: I'd say, "bone cancer in children? What's that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault. It's not right, it's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain?" That's what I would say.**¹
 - What should we say to such a powerful argument?
- Before we say anything, we must face a second related question that the problem of Christmas provokes. That is: **(SHOW SLIDE 9) How can Jesus be God's promised Messiah when he failed to bring peace on earth?**
 - I recently listened to a debate between a Jewish Rabbi and a Messianic Jew. The Rabbi argued that Christians are wrong to believe that Jesus is God's promised Messiah because the Old Testament clearly teaches that when the Messiah comes he will usher in a new world where peace will reign. The Rabbi said,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 10) "The reason why I and Jews throughout the last 2000 years didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah is because from our point of view he just failed the litmus test. There is only one test, which is to bring peace to the world. And look around, look at the news and the papers and we're not there. . . . We are not in a messianic world and therefore the messiah has not yet come."**²
- So, there you have it. The announcement of Christmas is that peace has come in Jesus. But the great problem of Christmas is that there is no peace.
 - This provokes two related questions that seem to undermine Christianity itself: why would a God of peace create a world filled with evil and suffering? And, how can Jesus be God's promised Messiah when he failed to bring peace on earth?

THE SOLUTION OF CHRISTMAS

- It is time to turn the corner in this message and look at the third point, which I am calling **(SHOW SLIDE 11) The solution of Christmas.**
 - All of these problems are solved when you learn the larger story of Christmas. You see the actual event of Jesus' birth is only one episode within the larger story. Oh yes, it is *the* great event but to understand why the moment of Jesus' birth was so important, you need to understand how it fits within the larger story of the entire Bible.
 - So let's take our remaining time to retell the larger story of the Bible, which is the larger story of Christmas. This larger story has four parts to it and we need all four to answer the problem of evil, death, and suffering.

PART 1: GOD'S ORIGINAL CREATION WAS MARKED BY PEACE

- Part 1 of **(SHOW SLIDE 12) The larger story of Christmas tells us that: 1) God's original creation was marked by peace.**

¹ "The Meaning of Life" with Gay Byrne, 2015.

² Debate on "Is Jesus the Jewish Messiah?" between Michael Brown (Messianic Jew and hosts The Line of Fire radio show in the USA) and Jonathan Romain (liberal UK Reform rabbi) on Oct 12, 2018 on *Unbelievable?* Show.

- Stephen Fry says, **“I cannot believe in a God who would create a world that is filled with evil and suffering.”** The answer to that is, **“No problem! The Bible is not asking you to believe in a God who would do that.”**
 - The Bible’s story begins with the fact that there was no evil or suffering in God’s original creation. Stephen Fry is making an elementary mistake that anyone reading the first two chapters of the Bible can correct.
- If the story of the Bible said, **“God created a world filled with evil and suffering”** then we should agree with Fry that God is not good and should not be respected.
 - But Genesis 1-2 make it plain that this is simply not the case. In fact, the God of the Bible is the kind of God we all say we want. He is a good God as evidenced by the fact that his original creation was marked by absolute peace.
 - So where did all the evil and suffering come from?

PART 2: HUMANITY’S SERPENT INSPIRED REBELLION BROKE THE PEACE

- Part 2 of the **(SHOW SLIDE 13) The larger story of Christmas tells us that: 2) Humanity’s serpent inspired rebellion broke the peace.**
 - As we have seen over the past few weeks, evil, death, and suffering are intruders in God’s good creation. They were not there in the beginning but entered the world when the serpent led Adam and Eve to rebel against their good and loving Creator.
 - Again, the Bible is so clear on this: It is not God, but us, who should be blamed for it was our rebellion that broke the original peace.
- Sometimes people say they can’t believe in the Bible because it is filled with stories of murder, rape, war, revenge, adultery, and polygamy. But the Bible is not endorsing these things. To the contrary, it is filled with these stories because it is showing us what life is like when we turn our backs on our loving Creator.
 - This may all sound very pessimistic and it is. But it is also very realistic. It fits the facts. All of this should be very appealing to you because the larger story of Christmas is right in sync with the pain and difficulties of life.
- You can see this right here in the story of Jesus’ birth. Jesus was not born in a bubble that protected him from all evil and suffering. No, he was born right into the middle of great evil and suffering.
 - It’s right there in verse 1. **READ 1 - In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.**
 - This is not a nice letter from the Canadian government asking you to fill out your census data. This is a decree from the Emperor of Rome. Rome became a world power through war. Rome brought peace by crushing, killing, and subjugating everyone else, including Israel. This is the emperor flexing his muscles to show everyone who is in control. People must register so they can be taxed and the taxes go to furthering Roman oppression.
- So, you see, Jesus is born into a world of oppression and injustice.
 - This is brutally expressed when King Herod murders all the boys under the age of two in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the baby Jesus.
 - Jesus and his family become refugees and flee to Egypt.
- Do you see how powerful this is? People accuse God not caring about evil and suffering – that he keeps himself removed from it all. But again, we see that this is an elementary mistake.
 - The message of Christmas tells us that God did not remain aloof from it all.
 - No, God became a man. And when he came, he was not born on a space ship that orbited the earth, removed from it all. No! The message of Christmas is that God entered right into the midst of evil, suffering, and death.
- At this point you might say, **“Okay, I can accept that God didn’t actually create a world of evil. And I like the idea that he entered into it all. But if God is so loving and powerful then why doesn’t do anything to stop evil and suffering?”**

- Again, this would be a perfectly legitimate objection if the story said, **“God is good but he refuses to do anything about evil and suffering.”**
 - But that is *not* the story.

PART 3: GOD SENT JESUS THE FIRST TIME TO BEGIN A NEW WORLD OF PEACE

- Part 3 of the **(SHOW SLIDE 14) The larger story of Christmas tells us that: 3) God sent Jesus the first time to *begin* a new world of peace.**
 - Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, God made a promise. In Genesis 3:14-15 God told the devil that a boy would be born and that this boy would grow up to fight and defeat the devil himself.
 - God told the serpent that this man **“will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”**
- Note this very carefully. On the very same day that we broke the original peace, God promised to act to restore that peace. As soon as evil, death, and suffering entered the world God promised to do something about it.
 - This promise is greatly expanded throughout the Old Testament. God promises that this man, “the Messiah,” will die for his people’s sin so they can be forgiven and brought back into peace with God. This Messiah will defeat death itself and this Messiah will bring his people into a new heavens and a new earth where all the wrongs will be made right.
 - In short, God promised to do something about it.
- That is why the message of Christmas is so joyous. The angels are saying, **“He’s here! God’s Messiah has come! The rescuer has arrived! Peace has come in the person of Jesus.”**
 - Jesus laid the foundation for this world of peace by dealing with our greatest problem. Our great problem is that we all stand condemned before God for our sins. But on the cross Jesus died for our sins that anyone who believes in him might be forgiven and have peace with God.
 - God sent Jesus the first time to *begin* a new world of peace. He began this world with the most important peace of all – peace between God and us. Do you know this peace? Have you asked Jesus to forgive you and bring you back into relationship with God?
- Now all of this is all very wonderful and true. But what about Henry Longfellow’s struggle?
 - What about all the continued pain and suffering we face in our personal lives?
 - If peace has come in Jesus then where is the peace?
- Once again, we must say that if the Bible’s story said that God promised to completely restore the peace when Jesus came, then Jesus did, in fact, fail the litmus test.
 - But once again, this is a basic failure to actually read the story. Jesus himself clearly taught that God’s new world of peace would come in two stages.
 - So that brings us to the fourth part of the larger story of Christmas, which gives the final answer to all evil, death, and suffering.

PART 4: JESUS IS COMING AGAIN TO COMPLETE GOD’S NEW WORLD OF PEACE

- Part 4 of the **(SHOW SLIDE 15) The larger story of Christmas tells us that: 4) God will send Jesus a second time to *complete* the new world of peace.**
 - Jesus clearly taught that there was a difference between his first coming and his second coming. He came the first time to begin a new world of peace by creating peace with God. He will come a second time to rid his universe of all evil, death, and suffering and give his people a new world of peace. So you see, everything is right on schedule.
 - The story of Christmas then answers the problem of evil exactly how we want it answered. We want God to intervene and stop evil. We want a world where peace reigns. And the larger story of Christmas is that through Jesus, God is going to give us exactly what we are asking for.

- This is such good news, especially in the face of the worst kinds of evil and suffering. There is some suffering in this world of which we can say, ***“I do not like this but it makes me stronger.”*** There is some suffering in this world of which we can say, ***“I hate it but I can still see some reasons for it.”***
 - But there is some suffering for which we have no answers. How else do you describe sexual abuse? How else do you describe the pain of a parent lowering the coffin of their child into the ground? How else do you describe mental illness, genocide, bereavement, and the intense physical suffering of many diseases?
 - In our lives we will face suffering for which we have no answers. It mystifies our minds. It steals our strength. It breaks our will.
- Again, the Bible faces these facts as they are. It doesn’t give cliché answers but says, ***“This really is as bad as it seems for you live in a world where there is no peace.”*** But the story of Christmas tells us that God became a man in order to restore the peace.
 - There is a great day coming when he will return and complete it. This is why Paul writes, ***“this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”*** This is why he says, ***“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”***
 - Paul is saying, ***“add up all the pain and suffering of this life. Put it on a scale. Despite it’s crushing weight in this life, it is no more than the weight of a feather in comparison to the weight of joy and gladness that is coming to you in God’s new world.”***
- Jesus will return to complete God’s new world of peace. He will crush the head of the serpent, cast him into hell, and destroy death. He will renew the universe and give his people a home on the new earth.
 - Rev 21 says, ***“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”***
 - Is 51 says that God’s ransomed people will ***“come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”***
- One breath in that new world will fill you with a strength you’ve never known in this life. One drink from a river in that new world will heal the worst wounds you suffered here. One note of music in that new world will cause your heart to soar to heights of bliss you have never known.
 - And then you will see him. Then you will look upon the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you. And he will stretch out his hand and say, ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.”***

CONCLUSION

- So you see the larger story of Christmas answers all the problems that we have raised. It turns out that our accusations against God have been completely wrong. We say we want a good and loving God who does something about all the evil and suffering in the world. And it turns out that the kind of God we want is exactly the God who exists.
 - The message of Christmas declares that God became a man in order to restore the peace that was lost through our sin. He came the first time to begin a new world of peace by dying for our sins that we might have peace with God. He will come a second time to complete this new world of peace.
 - Everything is right on schedule.
- It is this great future hope that saves us from despair and strengthens us to live in a world that has no peace.
 - And this is why Henry Longfellow wrote one last stanza about the bells he heard ringing out on Christmas day: **(SHOW SLIDE 16)**
 - **Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”**